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## Destroying Angel

BY ERIC CAMERON

SOMETIMES I wonder if memories of an event tend to change, or if it is that people change over the years? It might even be that the memories themselves change people a little. Like the memory of what happened to my brother, Ernest.

It had been bad enough having an older brother, but to have one I forever had to protect from the bullying of other boys was a humiliating burden. Ernest was three years older and so much bigger, yet he followed me everywhere. My mother explained that while his sturdy body had developed normally, Ernest's mind had lagged. Anguish and remorse accentuated the lines in her face, as if she blamed herself for his condition.

"What'll happen to Ernie when he gets big like Dad?" I asked when I was twelve years old. "Won't he ever learn to read and write?"

Mother shook her head and sighed.

"Will I always have to mind Ernie when he's grown up?" I asked anxiously.

"You'll have to decide that for yourself when the time comes, Paul."

There were so many occasions when I felt ashamed of being seen with Ernest; sometimes he embarrassed me so much I could have struck him dead. He did things impulsively, without thinking, and it was sheer waste of time and words to scold him. As words scattered around him like pebbles, Ernest would smile vaguely and give a helpless little shrug.



next door and her bank clerk boy friend was a surprise. When my father leaned down and brushed his lips on the top of my mother's head, my throat tightened and through wet eyelids I saw the blurry light of the firefly go flickering across the lawn. Giving a loud, warning cough, I raced in pursuit. When I carried the jar to our bedroom, Ernie stayed awake half the night watching the firefly and I regretted my generous impulse.

It was the bicycle that exasperated me most, and I began to wish that somebody would steal it; but it was too old, too battered, too rusty for anyone to bother with. One day Ernest discovered a hill. As the bicycle picked up speed, he laughed helplessly the way he did when we wrestled and I tickled him to break his hold on me. The hill provided a temporary respite for me. I stretched out in the shade of a tree and watched the wind sculpture the massed cloud banks into ever-changing shapes as they drifted majestically across the sky. Ernest would swoop happily down the hill and I could follow his course without looking, because the bicycle squeaked in spite of frequent oilings. Then he would trudge slowly up to the top and repeat the descent again and again.

One afternoon I was fascinated by a squirrel stalking a bird's nest when the screech of tortured tires was followed by a clang of metal against metal. As goose pimples crawled over me, I strained to hear, but was afraid to look because I was overwhelmed by a surge of guilt and remorse. In that moment I had been aware of a feeling of secret relief, as if something had parted the chain binding me to Ernest.

But my brother had not been killed. Apart from a slight cut on the forehead and a grazed elbow he was unscathed. The bicycle, rammed, was jammed under the front of the coal truck it had repaired. When the truck driver pronounced it mangled beyond repair I had to restrain my enthusiasm because Ernest wept bitterly.

After trying in vain for a week to get the wreck to go again, Ernest in a frenzy of rage and despair picked up the bicycle and hurled it over the back fence. It narrowly missed Mrs. Dawson who was bent over weeding her vegetable patches.

Minutes later, the bicycle sailed back impelled by Mr. Dawson, a huge, beetle-browed railroad brakeman with tobacco-stained teeth and a carpet of red hair on his barrel chest. Hair curled from his ears and nose like tangled rusty wire and even his broad

back was liberally forested. He bellowed a warning that Ernest would be torn limb from limb if he ever tried any more crazy stunts. The twisted skeleton of the bicycle rusted all summer until the energetic weeds concealed it from view. There were times when I was tempted to heave the wreck back into the Dawsons' yard just to see if that ferocious man might carry out his threat. In a book of children's stories there was an illustration for the Jack the Giant Killer tale, of a scowling, snaggle-toothed giant with red hair that Ernest called Mr. Dawson. He avoided looking at it and I could paralyze him with dread simply by chanting in a deep voice: "Fe, fo, fi, fum . . . Mr. Dawson's going to come!"

The winter I remember most vividly had suddenly collapsed into spring, and mild weather bearded the eaves of every roof with icicles. On a Saturday afternoon when the school rink was too soft for hockey, I decided to walk out of town along the tracks to the railroad bridge. It spanned the river where it narrowed to a steep gorge and plunged down in a series of almost vertical steps. The ice formations would be striking to see, particularly any of them thawed enough to break free and thundered down on the rocks. Ernest, as usual, was as inseparable as my shadow.

It was a brilliant, windless day; everything seemed to be standing still in anticipation of spring's arrival. I balanced on one of the rails, pretending I was a performer on the circus high wire, working without a safety net, concentrating on keeping my footing and holding my arms out. Every time I lost my balance I could imagine the gasp of horror from the spectators who breathed as one, and I saw the white mass of tilted faces whirling up to meet me as I tumbled down to the sawdust ring.

When we came to a short tunnel through a hill, Ernest wanted to detour around it. He was frightened of the unseen terrors in its gloomy, dripping depths. It had a sooty, cindery smell that made you feel you wanted to sneeze.

"Stop being such a big baby," I snapped impatiently. Clutching my hand, Ernest stumbled after me into the dark and I half-hoped a train would catch us in the tunnel and really give him something to fear. The prospect of yet another summer and echoes boomed along the tunnel.

A vague, black form suddenly hovered before us and then disappeared. Ernest whimpered in fear as we hurried on through the tunnel toward the patch of light that was the other end. The

on his knees in the rapidly rising water, tearing at the owl. When the ice parted like the jaws of a whale, Ernest was sucked down into the greedy, swirling black water with a faint, despairing cry. The owl's wings flailed the surface, then vanished. Only the water gurgled with an evil, chuckling sound.

The moment began to fill with a sense of sadness and departure and a frightened melancholy bloomed inside me. And then, as I turned away from the ominous hole in the ice, I was suddenly swept with a great feeling of freedom and liberation, as if a dark fungus growth compounded of accumulated shame, resentment and jealousy had been excised from my mind.

But the rapture of release was short-lived. As I climbed the river bank, the bare branches of the somber trees ticked softly in a slight wind that had sprung up, like the whispering voices of those who might ask what I had done to try and save my brother. I had a chilling vision of Ernest and the snow owl, locked in their everlasting embrace, being swept over the boiling falls to the jagged rocks below. I began to run.

By the time I reached the railroad tunnel, the sun had gone and soft snowflakes sifted from the leaden sky. When I was a few yards from the tunnel entrance, a snow owl suddenly swept out from its throat and sailed over me without a sound, so low that I could have reached up and touched it. As it melted into the gloomy woods, I wondered, trembling, if it had been an apparition.

Somehow, the memory of Ernest's tragedy became associated in my mind with the picture of "The Destroying Angel." In time, I believed that perhaps the strange bird had performed an act of mercy, savage though it was. For after all, what would life have been like for Ernest if he had grown up? I never saw another snow owl in our region, and when I told people what had happened I began to sense that they thought I was imagining that part of the incident. They knew that Ernest had not been "all there" so naturally they came to certain conclusions, one being that what ran in the family ran in the family. Years later I was relieved to have a wildlife expert suggest that the owls probably had been a pair driven south by a shortage of food.

My parents never held me responsible for what happened. In fact, my mother maintained that it wouldn't have happened if Ernest had heeded my warning about the dangerous state of the ice. When I awake in the still of the night and lie there in the dark,

remembering that moment in every detail, I recall having warned him about the ice. At first I didn't remember, but as time went on the memory became clearer. In the excitement, I suppose I wasn't aware of having tried to restrain Ernest from venturing after the owl. They say it's the same with car accidents; the witnesses don't always recall precisely what happened until someone jogs their memory. And if my mother believed that I had tried to stop Ernest, then I must have. It makes me feel a little better to remember it that way.